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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the cognitive and behavioral consequences of our impressions of other people in the context of social stereotypes. Social stereotypes are a special case of interpersonal perception. Though they are usually simple and overgeneralized, many social stereotypes concern highly visible and distinctive personal characteristics, such as sex and race. These pieces of information are usually the first to be noticed in social interaction and can gain high priority for channeling subsequent information processing and interaction. As such, social stereotypes may be used to consider the cognitive and behavioral consequences of person perception. These stereotypes may influence information processing that serves to bolster and strengthen them. Stereotype-based beliefs may serve as grounds for predictions about the target's future behavior and may guide and influence the perceiver's interactions with the target. In this way, social stereotypes may create their own reality by channeling interaction in ways that cause the stereotyped individual to behaviorally confirm the perceiver's stereotype. The author describes an experiment designed to test this behavioral confirmation hypothesis. Because of the implications of the self-fulfilling effects of social stereotypes upon social interaction, the study of these stereotypes becomes important to social psychology. (Author/GC)

On the Self-Fulfilling Nature of Social Stereotypes

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On the Self-Fulfilling Nature of Social Stereotypes

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Cognitive social psychology is concerned with the processes by which individuals gain knowledge about behavior and events that they encounter in social interaction, and how they use this knowledge to guide their actions. From this perspective, people are "constructive thinkers" searching for the causes of behavior, drawing inferences about people and their circumstances, and acting upon this knowledge.

Most empirical work in this domain--largely stimulated and guided by the attribution theories--has focused on the processing of information, the "machinery" of social cognition. Some outcomes of this research have been the specification of how individuals identify the causes of an actor's behavior, how individuals make inferences about the traits and dispositions of the actor, and how individuals make predictions about the actor's future behavior.

It is noteworthy that comparatively little theoretical and empirical attention has been directed to the other fundamental question within the cognitive social psychologist's mandate: What are the cognitive and behavioral consequences of our impressions of other people? From my vantage point, current-day attribution theorists leave the individual "lost in thought," with no machinery that links "thought" to "action." It is to this concern that I have addressed myself, both theoretically and empirically, in the context of social stereotypes.

Social stereotypes are a special case of interpersonal perception. Stereotypes are usually simple, overgeneralized and widely accepted.

But stereotypes are often highly inaccurate. It is simply not true that all Germans are industrious, or that all women are dependent and conforming. Nonetheless, many social stereotypes concern highly visible and distinctive personal characteristics; for example, sex and race. These pieces of information are usually the first to be noticed in social interaction and can gain high priority for channeling subsequent information processing and even social interaction. Social stereotypes are thus an ideal testing ground for considering the cognitive and behavioral consequences of person perception.

Cognitive and Behavioral Consequences of Social Stereotypes

Numerous factors may help sustain our stereotypes and prevent disconfirmation of "erroneous" stereotype-based initial impressions of specific others. First, social stereotypes may influence information processing in ways that serve to bolster and strengthen these stereotypes. Such cognitive bolstering processes may provide the perceiver with an "evidence base" that gives compelling cognitive reality to any traits that he or she may have erroneously attributed to a target individual initially. This reality is, of course, entirely cognitive: it is in the eye and mind of the beholder.

Moreover, stereotype-based beliefs may serve as grounds for predictions about the target's future behavior and may guide and influence the perceiver's interactions with the target. This process itself may generate behaviors on the part of the target that erroneously confirm the predictions and validate the beliefs of the perceiver. In our empirical research, we have demonstrated that stereotypes may create their own social reality by channeling social interaction in ways that cause the stereotyped individual to <u>behaviorally confirm</u> the perceiver's stereotype.

One widely held stereotype in this culture involves physical attractiveness. Considerable evidence suggests that the attractive are assumed to possess more socially desirable personality traits and are expected to lead better lives than their unattractive counterparts (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). Attractive persons are perceived to have virtually every character trait that is socially desirable to the perceiver: "Physically attractive people, for example, [are] perceived to be more sexually warm and responsive, sensitive, kind, interesting, strong, poised, modest, sociable, and outgoing than persons of lesser physical attractiveness" (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). This powerful stereotype has been found for male and female judges, for male and female stimulus persons. In addition, attractive people are predicted to have happier social, professional, and personal lives in store for them than are their less attractive counterparts.

What of the validity of the physical attractiveness stereotype? Are the physically attractive actually more likeable, friendly, sensitive, and confident than the unattractive? Are they more successful socially and professionally? The point I wish to focus upon here is that, independently of the general validity of the stereotype, it may channel interaction so as to <u>behaviorally confirm</u> itself in specific dyadic interaction contexts. Individuals may have different patterns and styles of interaction for those whom they perceive to be physically attractive and for those whom they consider unattractive. These differences in self-presentation and interaction style may, in turn, elicit and nurture behaviors from the target person that are in accord with the stereotype. That is, the physically attractive may actually come to behave in a friendly, likeable, sociable manner--not because they necessarily possess these dispositions, but because the behavior of others elicits and maintains behaviors taken to be manifestations of such traits.

Behavioral Confirmation in Social Interaction

In our initial investigation of the self-fulfilling nature of this stereotype, Elizabeth Decker Tanke, Ellen Berscheid and I sought to demonstrate the behavioral confirmation of the physical attractiveness stereotype in a social interaction context designed to mirror as faithfully as possible the spontaneous generation of first impressions in everyday social interaction and the subsequent channeling influences of these impressions on social interaction (Snyder et al., in press). In order to do so, pairs of previously unacquainted individuals (designated, for our purposes as a "perceiver" and a "target") interacted in a getting-acquainted situation that had been constructed to allow us to control the information that one member of the dyad (the male "perceiver") received about the physical attractiveness of the other individual (the female "target"). In this way, it was possible to separately evaluate the effects of actual and perceived physical attractiveness on the display of self-presentational and expressive behaviors associated with the stereotype that links beauty and goodness. In order to measure the extent to which the self-presentation of the target individual matched the perceiver's stereotype, naive observer-judges who were unaware of the actual or perceived physical attractiveness of either participant listened to and evaluated tape recordings of the interaction.

Fifty-one male and 51 female undergraduates at the University of Minnesota participated, for extra course credit, in what had been described as a study of "the processes by which people become acquainted with each other". These individuals interacted in male-female dyads in a getting acquainted situation in which they could hear but not see each other (a

telephone conversation). Before initiating the conversation, the male member of each dyad received a Polaroid snapshot of his female interaction partner. These photographs, which had been prepared in advance and assigned at random to dyads, identified the target as either physically attractive (Attractive-Target condition) or physically unattractive (Unattractive-Target condition). Each dyad engaged in a ten-minute unstructured telephone conversation that was tape recorded. Each participant's voice was recorded on a separate channel of the tape.

In order to assess the extent to which the actions of the female targets provided behavioral confirmation for the stereotypes of the male perceivers, twelve observer-judges listened to the tape recordings of the getting-acquainted conversations. The observer-judges were unaware of the experimental hypotheses and knew nothing of the actual or perceived physical attractiveness of the individual whom they heard on the tapes. They heard only the track of the tapes containing the female participants' voices. (For further details of the experimental procedures, see Snyder et al., in press.)

In order to chart the process of behavioral confirmation of stereotype-based beliefs in these dyadic social interactions, we examined the effects of our manipulation of the target's apparent physical attractiveness on: (a) the male perceivers' initial impressions of their female targets, and (b) the females' behavioral self-presentation during their interactions, as measured by the observer-judges ratings' of the tape-recordings of their voices.

The male perceivers clearly formed their initial impressions of their specific female targets on the basis of general stereotypes that associated physical attractiveness and socially desirable personality characteristics. On measures of first impressions that we collected after the perceivers had been given access to their partners' photographs but before the initiation of the getting-acquainted conversations, it was clear that--as dictated by the physical attractiveness stereotype--males who anticipated physically attractive partners expected to interact with comparatively sociable, poised, humorous, and socially adept individuals. By contrast, males faced with the prospect of getting acquainted with relatively unattractive partners, fashioned images of rather unsociable, awkward, serious, and socially inept creatures.

Not only did our perceivers fashion their images of their discussion partners on the basis of their stereotyped intuitions about the links between beauty and goodness of character, but these stereotype-based anticipations initiated a chain of events that resulted in the behavioral confirmation of these initially erroneous inferences. Analysis of the observer-judges' ratings of the audiotape recordings of the conversations indicated that female targets who were perceived to be (unbeknownst to them) physically attractive (as a consequence of random assignment to the "Attractive Picture" experimental condition) actually came to behave in a friendly, likeable, and sociable manner. This behavioral confirmation was discernible even by outside observer-judges who knew nothing of the actual or perceived physical attractiveness of the target individuals. In this demonstration of behavioral confirmation in social interaction, the "beautiful people" became "good

people" not because they necessarily possessed the socially-valued dispositions that had been attributed to them, but because the actions of the perceivers based upon their stereotyped beliefs had erroneously confirmed and validated these beliefs. (For further details of the results, see Snyder et al., in press.)

Our research points to the powerful, but often unnoticed, consequences of our social stereotypes. In our demonstration, first impressions and expectations that were based upon common cultural stereotypes about physical attractiveness channeled the unfolding dynamics of social interaction and acquaintance processes in ways that actually made those stereotyped first impressions come true. Our perceivers, in anticipation of interaction, fashioned "erroneous" images of their specific partners that reflected their general stereotypes about physical attractiveness. Moreover, our perceivers had very different patterns and styles of interaction for those whom they perceived to be physically attractive and unattractive. These differences in self-presentation and interaction style, in turn, elicited and nurtured behaviors of the target that were consistent with the perceivers' initial stereotypes. Targets who were perceived (unbeknownst to them) to be physically attractive actually came to behave in a friendly, likeable, and sociable manner. The perceivers' beliefs about their targets based upon their stereotyped intuitions about the world had initiated a process that produced behavioral confirmation of those beliefs. The initially erroneous impressions of the perceivers had become real. Such was the power of stereotypes: belief had created reality.

Behavioral Confirmation: A Theoretical Perspective

In our more recent empirical research and conceptual analysis, we have attempted to chart the cognitive and behavioral processes that underly and generate behavioral confirmation (Snyder, Note 1; Snyder & Swann, in press).

We view the unfolding over time of the events of the behavioral confirmation process in terms of those critical cognitive activities of perceiver and target by which each formulates strategies of action. The first "link" in the "chain" of behavioral confirmation is that between the labeling perceiver's beliefs about his partner (e.g., "she is a sociable person") and the actions generated by those beliefs (e.g., "I will be my most charming self"). We view this link between thought and action as a form of "reality-testing." Social labels, beliefs, and attributions may serve as grounds for predictions and generate behaviors designed to validate or invalidate these beliefs (cf. Kelly, 1955). This formation and testing of these hypotheses may be guided by "scripts" (cf. Abelson, 1976) or "rules of thumb." These rules of thumb are scenarios involving sequences of events and consequences and reflect implicit theories of the interplay between persons and their situations. Thus, a perceiver in the Attractive-Target condition of our experiment might (literally or metaphorically) say to himself: "If she is as warm and friendly as I think she is, then she will be a wonderful person to get to know. She'll have all kinds of interesting things to talk about. Why don't I get the relationship off to a good start by getting to know her, and perhaps we'll become friends." He may bolster this line of thought with instances from his own life experiences or those of acquaintances where such a strategy has been successful. Moreover, he may remind himself of specific

individuals, similar in appearance to the target, who would clearly deserve the friendly treatment he now plans for the target (cf. Abelson's [1976] discussion of the use of scripts in decision-making and behavior-planning).

Having symbolically formulated his strategy, the perceiver proceeds to behaviorally test his hypothesis. But the hypothesis-testing process itself may generate behaviors that erroneously confirm the prediction and validate the attribution-based hypothesis. For the targets themselves, no doubt, formulate their strategies of coping with their opponents using similar rules of thumb (e.g., "If this guy, for no apparent ulterior motive, starts off with so much friendliness, clearly he appreciates my great personality and I should respond in kind and be equally friendly to him.") and assimilate their behavior to that of the perceiver.

Perhaps, our perceivers may commit the classic attribution error (cf. Ross, 1977): they may attribute the targets' behavior to corresponding inner dispositions rather than to the constraints of the reality-testing procedure. If so, they seem blissfully unaware of the causal role that their own activities play in generating the behavioral evidence that erroneously confirms their expectations, inferences, and attributional labels. Unbeknownst to them, the reality that they perceive to exist "out there" in the social world has in fact been constructed by their own transactions with the social world. <u>Reality-testing</u> has become <u>reality-construction</u>. It is not that the perceivers are unaware of their beliefs or their actions based upon those beliefs. It is that they seem to be unaware of their impact on

the behavior of others; that how others treat them is partially a reflection of how they first treated those others.

According to the theoretical analysis of behavioral confirmation as reality-testing, the perceiver's activity is conceptualized as the cognitive formulation and the behavioral testing of hypotheses. Behavioral confirmation is seen as the unintended reality-constructing consequence of reality-testing: perceivers as reality-testers unknowingly fail to take adequate account of the biased nature of their hypothesis-generation and hypothesis-testing procedures. But how appropriate is it to regard perceivers in this investigation as reality-testers? After all, they were not explicitly instructed to test the accuracy of their beliefs about the targets' natures. Perhaps, rather than testing reality, perceivers were simply coping with the reality of their targets' natures. However, from my theoretical perspective, reality-testing is in practice no different than reality-coping. When perceivers are in doubt about the accuracy of their beliefs about targets, they may test the reality of these beliefs by treating targets "as if" these beliefs were accurate. When perceivers have no uncertainty about the reality of their beliefs, they may cope by (quite reasonably) treating targets "as if" they were the persons they are reputed to be. In either case--whether reality-testing or reality-coping--perceivers use their beliefs about the target to formulate interaction strategies of treating targets "as if" their initial beliefs were accurate. In either case, behavioral confirmation may be the outcome of such "as if" strategies.

Behavioral Confirmation and the Nature of Social Perception

Whatever the ultimate fate of this admittedly speculative analysis of

behavioral confirmation as reality-testing, the theoretical implications of the behavioral confirmation process itself cannot be ignored or minimized. Researchers in social perception and the attribution process have focused almost exclusively on the manner in which individuals process information provided to them as they form impressions of other people. This information processing is typically studied in static circumstances of minimal personal involvement for the perceiver (cf. Taylor, Note 2; Taylor & Fiske, Note 3). Such an approach may, unfortunately, blind us to the intimate interplay between social perception and social interaction in ongoing interpersonal relationships. Our investigation of behavioral confirmation suggests that traditional information processing approaches may seriously underestimate the extent to which the information that perceivers process in actual social interaction may be largely a product of the perceiver's own actions toward their targets, actions that may be based upon and guided by their beliefs about those targets.

From my perspective, the perceiver's knowledge of the target may be seen as active, initiatory cognitive structures or conceptual schemas that guide and influence: (a) the processing of information about the target, (b) the search for new information about the target, and (c) the course and outcome of social interaction between perceiver and target. The perceiver's knowledge of the target includes anticipations of what events are to appear as the interaction unfolds. It may be easier to construct mental scenarios in which the target acts in accord with the perceiver's beliefs. Accordingly, it is these "as if" scenarios (rather than "as if not" scenarios, in which the target

violates the perceiver's expectations) that the perceiver may use to guide his or her actions toward the target. As a consequence of this process, the target's behavior may be constrained in ways that generate confirming evidence for the perceiver's anticipations. Behavioral confirmation is then an end product of the chain of events first initiated by the perceiver's beliefs.

Our investigation suggests that a cognitive social psychology must pay explicit attention to the ways by which perceivers create the information that they process in addition to probing the machinery of information processing itself. Not only are our images of the social world a reflection of events in the social world, but the very events of the social world themselves may be reflections and products of our images of the social world.

Contemporary viewpoints in cognitive and perceptual psychology emphasize the active, integrative, and constructive aspects of human information processing (e.g., Bower, 1975; Neisser, 1976). My viewpoint, although clearly compatible with this constructivist perspective on the formation of knowledge, goes at least one important step beyond this approach. Not only is knowledge (at least in the domain of social cognition) the product of active, constructive processes, but the very events that serve as the "raw materials" for this information-processing are themselves the product of active, constructive processes generated by the individual's beliefs. It is in this sense that beliefs can and do create social reality.

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